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FOR ASSISTANT SECRETARY SAUERBREY

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SUBJECT: CENTRAL HIGHLANDS SCENE SETTER FOR VISIT OF PRM ASSISTANT
SECRETARY SAUERBREY

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¶1. (SBU) HCMC looks forward to welcoming you and your team to southern Vietnam and the Central Highlands. Humanitarian Resettlement Section (HRS) Chief Tim Swanson will present you with a comprehensive picture of HRS activities here, including the bilateral Humanitarian Resettlement process, VISAS-93 family reunification cases, Priority One visa cases and Amerasians. We hope to use your lunch with our Vietnamese counterparts in the Humanitarian Resettlement process to strengthen further a good cooperative relationship.

¶2. (SBU) To set the stage for your visit to the Central Highlands, this message provides background and information on conditions for ethnic minorities in the region. This analysis is based on a dozen visits to the area by ConGen staff over the past two years, meetings with returnees from Cambodia, discussions with contacts based in the Central Highlands and hundreds of interviews with ethnic minority VISAS-93 beneficiaries conducted in private in HCMC.

Who are the Montagnards?

¶3. (SBU) The term Montagnard (mountain people) is a carryover from the French colonial period in Vietnam. In its broadest sense, the term refers to the 51 ethnic minority groups living in and along Vietnam's mountain backbone running from central Vietnam to the border with China. The term is thus shorthand for ethnic minorities in Vietnam. The hill tribes from Vietnam's five Central Highlands provinces (Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Dak Nong, Kontum and Lam Dong) are ethnically distinct from the Hmong and other hill tribes from northern Vietnam. Few, if any, ethnic minority individuals in Vietnam describe themselves as Montagnards.

¶4. (SBU) Before 1975 the population of the Central Highlands was between 1 and 1.5 million, and was at least 70 percent ethnic minority. Since 1975, the population has grown to roughly 4.7 million, of whom about 1.3 to 1.5 million are indigenous ethnic minority groups. Of these, up to 475,000 are Protestant and 200,000 are Roman Catholic, significant increases from 1975. Of the approximately 30 ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands, the main groups are the Jarai (318,000), Ede (270,000), Bahnar (175,000), Sedang (127,000), Koho (129,000), Mnong (93,000), and Stieng (67,000).

¶5. (SBU) The change in demographics in the Central Highlands since 1975 was the result of a heavy migration of

ethnic Kinh Vietnamese from the poor and densely populated rural areas in northern Vietnam and the Mekong Delta. In recent years, ethnic minority groups from the Northwest Highlands, such as the Hmong, the Sanchi and the Tay have moved to the Central Highlands for economic and religious freedom reasons. This influx of outsiders, coupled with GVN efforts to develop cash-crop agriculture, accelerated displacement of indigenous groups from their traditional lands and undermined their traditional semi-nomadic, slash and burn agricultural system. Poorly educated, the local minorities were unable to compete with migrants. Frustrations, principally over land and poverty, helped spark region-wide protests against the government in 2001 and 2004. In the wake of these disturbances, the GVN severely limited in-migration to the area and banned the transfer of land rights from ethnic minorities to Kinh Vietnamese.

What is the Dega Movement?

16. (SBU) The Central Highlands traditionally have been difficult to govern; local indigenous peoples have long held national aspirations. Ethnic minorities clashed with the Republic of Vietnam in the 1950's and early 1960's as a result of conscription into the military and programs to encourage ethnic Vietnamese migration. Some ethnic minority leaders joined the ranks of the Viet Cong, while others launched an armed and political movement for an independent ethnic minority -- Dega -- state. The United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races, known as FULRO (by its French initials) was the military arm of the Dega separatist movement. After the war, FULRO continued its anti-GVN guerilla activities until 1992. Former FULRO leader Kok Ksor heads the "Montagnard Foundation," a South Carolina-based NGO that calls itself the "true voice of the Montagnard people."

17. (SBU) Although FULRO's armed resistance never threatened Vietnamese control of the Central Highlands, the resistance

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complicated reconstruction and helped cement distrust and suspicion by Communist leaders towards the ethnic minority communities that dominated FULRO, principally the Ede and Jarai. Despite the end of the FULRO insurgency, the idea of ethnic minority, "Dega" nationalism continues to resonate among some in the ethnic Ede, Jarai and Mnong communities in the Central Highlands. Meanwhile, Vietnam's development efforts have resulted in some progress on the economic front. Compared to other ethnic minority groups elsewhere in Vietnam, the ethnic communities in the Central Highlands are more prosperous and appear to receive more government assistance. For example, many Visas-93 beneficiaries tell us that their villages are connected to the power grid, have potable water and see some government efforts to develop their villages. Beyond promoting the general goal of improving the economy, these efforts also serve to weaken support for separatists.

Impact of the Dega Movement

18. (SBU) Our contacts in the Central Highlands support GVN claims that Kok Ksor and other Dega leaders continue to agitate for the creation of an independent ethnic minority state. The Dega movement played at least some role in organizing and fomenting the 2001 and 2004 protests in the Central Highlands, taking advantage of ethnic minority feelings of disenfranchisement and dislocation. The Dega movement also reportedly helps facilitate the cross-border movement of ethnic minorities to Cambodia.

19. (SBU) As part of this strategy, the Dega movement sought to create a "Dega Protestant Church," to reach a large number of ethnic minority members and to create another

avenue to promote the idea of ethnic minority exclusivity. The presence of Dega nationalists in Protestant religious organizations in the Central Highlands -- including the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam -- has complicated and slowed the process of registration and recognition of churches and congregations. Over the past two years, however, Protestant religious organizations operating in the Central Highlands that do not have a nationalist/separatist overlay have been given far more leeway to operate. The province of Gia Lai has been a pace-setter in this regard.

Security Conditions in the Central Highlands

¶10. (SBU) Security conditions in the Central Highlands tend to be tighter than other areas in HCMC's consular district, principally in response to security concerns over separatism. The government also has tightened considerably controls along the border to try and stem illegal cross-border migration to Cambodia. We have documented some incidents of abuse as well as the arrests of cross border "facilitators" and those the government suspects are part of the Dega movement. However, we have seen no evidence to support allegations of systematic oppression of Central Highlands ethnic minority communities.

Cross-Border Migration to Cambodia

¶11. (SBU) Our interviews with returnees from Cambodia and our private meetings with Visas-93 beneficiaries indicate that lack of land and the search for economic opportunity are the most important factors driving cross border migration to Cambodia. Our Visas-93 beneficiary interviews also appear to show that some ethnic minority individuals in Cambodia have exaggerated or distorted their circumstances in Vietnam to make the best possible case for refugee status. The demographics of the border crossers also highlight economics as a driver of migration: many migrants are young, male, single and uneducated; they have little or no land; and, their economic future in Vietnam is marginal at best. With a handful of exceptions, all the cross-border migrants were born after the Vietnam War. In only a few instances did the families of these migrants serve alongside U.S. forces during the Vietnam War.

Treatment of Returnees and Visas-93 Beneficiaries

¶12. (SBU) Numerous interviews with returnees from Cambodia -- including some in private -- indicate that local authorities in the Central Highlands are abiding by

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Vietnam's commitment under the UNHCR Tripartite Agreement to reintegrate peacefully returnees into their communities, so long as the returnees do not violate Vietnamese law. Local authorities appear to be under instruction to tolerate a higher level of "misbehavior" on the part of returnees than they would under other circumstances. Voluntary and involuntary returnees are treated equally. With the exception of isolated cases in Kontum Province, we have not confirmed any cases of abuse of returnees. One returnee in Gia Lai was arrested in September 2005 for attempting to organize a new cross border flight to Cambodia. He was sentenced to four years in prison. UNHCR was able to visit him in prison during a visit to Gia Lai.

¶13. (SBU) We have seen no evidence to support allegations that the authorities in the Central Highlands are retaliating against the families of Visas-93 petitioners. The few cases of detentions or harassment of Visas-93 beneficiaries appear to have been in response to actions by those beneficiaries themselves. These include attempting to follow the spouse to Cambodia or providing clandestine

support for family members sought by police. Over 70 percent of our current Visas-93 caseload has been interviewed and processed in HCMC, with over half having already departed for the United States. There are indications that some beneficiary families do not wish to leave the Central Highlands. As with issues of religious freedom, Gia Lai Province has been most proactive in facilitating the Visas-93 process.

¶14. (SBU) For the foreseeable future, there will be some who will take the risk of traveling to Cambodia in hopes of finding a door to a better life. Even if more are sent back, the lure of a possible ticket to America or Europe will remain very tempting. Small numbers of those who are returned (voluntarily or not) will find it very difficult to reintegrate into their home villages. Embassy believes that such individuals may be legitimate candidates for the Mission's P-1 program or some other future in-country program.

Building a Stable Future for Ethnic Minorities

¶15. (SBU) Vietnam's international integration and USG engagement -- in Hanoi and in the Central Highlands -- has led to improved conditions for ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands over the past few years. Particularly after the 2004 protests, the GVN intensified its efforts to deal with complicated ethnic minority issues and has worked positively to give more space to ethnic minority Protestants. We are taking our first steps to assist the GVN in its efforts to integrate its ethnic minority communities -- and to prod the government to expand access to the Central Highlands -- by providing two million dollars to support NGO projects focusing on education and agricultural development.

¶16. (SBU) Development assistance administered directly by NGOs on site is critical to carving out a better future for the ethnic minorities. The GVN has a plethora of programs targeted at minorities. "Hard infrastructure," such as roads and electrification, appear relatively well-administered. The GVN seems to have less success in developing "soft infrastructure," such as education, micro-credit and agricultural extension.

¶17. (SBU) Closing the education gap between the local ethnic minorities and their Vietnamese counterparts is the key to long-term stability in the Central Highlands and reduced cross-border flight to Cambodia. The vast majority of ethnic minority members whom we have met spoke only limited Vietnamese at best and were not competitive for anything but the most basic (and worst paid) factory and plantation jobs. In contrast, ethnic Vietnamese migrants have better educational skills. In agriculture few minorities engage in cash crop production. Most are subsistence farmers and provide labor for state-owned plantations and their Kinh neighbors. This creates a vicious cycle in which the ethnic Vietnamese, out-earning the minorities, use their profits to buy land from them. Over the long-term, this phenomenon exacerbates the ethnic minority sense of dispossession.

¶18. (SBU) International aid and advocacy on behalf of the ethnic minorities is important to moderate the worst tendencies of Vietnamese security forces and to achieve continued progress in the Central Highlands. However,

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groups in the United States or elsewhere that continue to challenge Vietnam's sovereignty over the Central Highlands or encourage cross-border flight to Cambodia, are putting ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands at great risk. Such activities also undermine the willingness of provincial leaders to open up the Central Highlands.

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